HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 11-16

Margaret Murray Washington School
27 O Street, NW (Square 616, Part of Lot 866[1])

Meeting Date:	July 28, 2011
Applicant:	D.C. Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development
Owner:	The District of Columbia[2]
Affected ANCs:	ANC 5C
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the Margaret Murray Washington School, 27 O Street, NW, a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The main block of the school was constructed in 1912, to plans by District of Columbia Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford. Ashford favored the use of Gothic and Elizabethan styles for educational buildings, and designed the edifice in a simplified version of Collegiate Gothic or Tudor—a relatively flat, rectangular box with limestone entrance surrounds, triple-ganged Elizabethan windows, panels at the parapet containing a heraldic shield and Tudor-rose medallions, and even a stair "tower." Additions in 1928 and 1938—by Snowden's successor, Albert Harris, and prominent African-American architect Albert Cassell, respectively—were carefully designed for compatibility with the original construction, resulting in a symmetrical, U-shaped plan and similar brick and details.

Originally known as the O Street Vocational School, the school was established to provide "manual training for boys and domestic science and art for girls." A movement to encourage training in the mechanical, craft and domestic skills spread across Europe and America in the 1870s and 1880s, as the length of the typical school career increased, and populations had to adapt to increasingly mechanized industry and a transition to factory work from more traditional apprenticeships. By the end of the century, Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington espoused widespread vocational training for African Americans. While the shunting of children into vocational programs and away from traditional arts and humanities education often had sexist, racist and classist overtones, such training was largely a recognition that most of the population was employed in blue-collar labor and would remain so for decades. An increasingly technological and stratified society needed skilled workers in all fields. The O Street school had

[1] The school presently stands on the same lot as Slater School, but a subdivision to separate them again is pending.
[2] The property is owned by the District of Columbia but is expected to be transferred to an affordable-housing provider who is seeking federal rehabilitation tax credits.

several predecessors in Washington: the B.B. French School (1898), McKinley Technical School (1901), Armstrong Manual Training School (1902), Cardozo Elementary School (shifted to manual training 1911), and the Wisconsin Avenue Manual Training School (1912). In the first decade of the twentieth century, a "Schoolhouse Commission" recommended the provision of up to thirteen such schools, five for black students and eight for whites. The success of nearby Armstrong, in particular, devoted to the education of African-American students, encouraged the establishment of similar schools containing machine shops, carpentry and turning shops, smithies and foundries, kitchens, laundries, tailor and seamstress shops, and other facilities.

When the O Street school opened in 1913, its principal promoted the curriculum in local newspapers and attracted a first class of 96 students. The school offered instruction to pupils at nearby elementary schools as well as to the high-school-age youths that made up its student body. Female students outnumbered males significantly, especially when male enrollment plummeted during World War I. From that time, the school shifted its curriculum to exclusively "domestic" instruction. It was fitting then, that the institution was renamed in 1926 for the late widow of Booker T. Washington, "Lady Principal" of Tuskegee and a leader of several black feminist organizations and of the anti-lynching movement.

The Margaret Murray Washington School continued to draw students from a broader area, necessitating additions to the building in 1928 and 1938. During World War II, the school began offering courses in nursing. Its graduates were lauded by the military, and a three-year, evening nursing program grew quickly after the war and was soon accredited. The return of young veterans who had not graduated necessitated the re-opening of the school to young men. Some participated in the nursing program, while most concentrated in tailoring and food service. The adjacent Slater School functionally became an annex to M.M. Washington in 1951, and a final addition was constructed in 1971, a portion of the building that should be considered not character-defining for its architectural incompatibility and relatively recent age.

Over the years, M.M. Washington became part of a cluster of five important African-American schools located on N, O and P Streets, NW between North Capitol and 1st Streets. Individually and collectively, they illustrate the evolution of public education and public-education facilities for African-American students in Washington. The Margaret Murray Washington School is significant for its role educating Washington's youth. Schools were typically neighborhood visual landmarks and gathering places, but this one also drew more broadly from across the city, especially after instituting its popular and accredited nursing program. It is a significant example of a vocational school, exemplifying a theory of public education important through much of the twentieth century. The school thus merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B for contributions to broad patterns of history and National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D for architecture, as embodying "the distinctive characteristics of a type [or] period… of construction, as a Tudor-style school building erected for the vocational education of African-American students. Although altered with a non-contributing addition, the building retains high historic integrity.